

Learning Responsibility

Recently graduated from college, I was applying to various school systems for a teaching position. It was the late 60s, a period of unrest, social change, and innovation in education. I remember being shocked to receive the “information for teaching candidates” supplied by a locale high school in a fairly well-to-do area. I am paraphrasing: “We feel that the responsibility for the student’s success in learning is completely the teacher’s.”

It was obvious that the teacher was 100% responsible for teaching the student, but if the student refused to put in an effort, in my opinion, no teacher could reasonably be held responsible for that student’s failure. I suspected that the school system was attempting to countermand a culture of previously unenthusiastic teachers, who, having produced a less-than-stellar crop of students, blamed that failure on them. Maybe, but not likely. Most teachers teach because they want students to learn. I thought it more likely that the school administration was buying into a new educational philosophy, one that was so student-centric that the teachers had become the educational servants of the students. Little Freddie McFlop complains to Mrs. McFlop: “It’s not my fault I got an *F*, Ma. The teacher just wouldn’t take responsibility for my learning.”

Too many students, being human, tend to default to laziness. Remove responsibility from them and they might as well take a nap during class.

As a lifelong teacher, I fully believe that the teacher is responsible for doing everything in his or her power to get the message across to the student. I try every which-way to teach a lesson whenever I see blank stares or when students cannot seem to emulate me. But, were I *fully* responsible for their learning, everyone would magically get my lessons the first time through, would have no questions, and in fact, would never need an exam because he/she would know, transmorphogenetically (from organism to organism), exactly what I know.

In the martial arts, the tradition is the inverse of that innovative school system’s method. Traditionally, the teacher does whatever he does and the student contorts himself to learn as best s/he can. In this way, the student is always engaged, never lazy, and takes full responsibility for his/her learning.

But there is a problem with that traditional method, as well. Too many students either don’t learn their art correctly, or don’t learn it completely enough to pass it on. So, in the West and increasingly in the modern East, teachers are teaching (rather than just demonstrating) more than they used to. Yay! I think many of my generation went through the same frustrating process of learning under Asians who not only had a poor command of English but also were not gifted as teachers. If instead we were learning under Westerners who had studied under Asians, it was

no better, because those Westerners felt honor-bound to teach the art in the way they were taught. Some of us Western students, however, recognizing that many learners prefer to understand the Whys and Hows of a technique, a drill, a kata, or an application, consciously decided to break with tradition and teach in a more rational way. That's the main reason I have produced so many books and videos as study aids.

But wait! There may also be a problem with my non-traditional method, at least as far as my own private students. Why should they use all those training aids when they have the author right in front of them? Why should they practice before or after class when it would be so much more efficient to have Sensei correct them *during* class? As mentioned previously, too many students, being human, default to laziness.

It's my job to mix methods and to demand more of students. Otherwise, I will unconsciously be turning into the educators of that 1960s innovative school system that wanted teachers to take full responsibility for the student's learning and thus paid no attention to the student's efforts to learn responsibly.